Kremlin hails calls by Europeans to resume dialogue

MOSCOW: The Kremlin said on Friday it considered calls by some European states to resume dialogue with Russia as "positive", after French and Italian leaders called for re-engagement with Moscow on Ukraine.

Dialogue between the EU and Russia has been virtually frozen since Moscow launched its full-scale offensive on Ukraine in 2022. The bloc has imposed huge sanctions and travel restrictions on Russia.

French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni both recently said they were in favour of re-engaging with Moscow.

"We have noted statements made in recent days by a number of European leaders," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

"If this truly reflects the strategic vision of the Europeans, then it is a positive evolution of their position," he added.

"From Paris, from Rome and even from Berlin there is support for the idea that for there to be stability in Europe you need to talk to the Russians," said Peskov.

"This absolutely corresponds to our position."

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has not called for talks with Russia, but said this week that the EU should find a "balance" with Moscow for the future.

UK singled out

The Kremlin singled out Britain, which is not in the EU and which Moscow considers as one of its main adversaries, as having a "destructive" position.

"Britain keeps its radical stance," Peskov said, accusing London of not wanting peace.

Ukraine and European leaders have repeatedly said that Russian President Vladimir Putin is the main obstacle to peace and has no genuine desire to halt his four-year offensive.

Downing Street reiterated Prime Minister Keir Starmer's position, saying he had "no plan" to hold talks with Putin.

Few European leaders have spoken to Putin since he launched the offensive in Feb 2022.

The United States has taken the lead role in talks to end the almost four-year war, running shuttle diplomacy between Russian and Ukrainian officials.

"I think the time has come for Europe to talk to Russia," Italy's Meloni said earlier this month.

She followed Macron, who said last month that it would be "useful" for Europe to re-engage with Putin.

'Absurd' situation

Armin Laschet, a prominent member of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's party, called on Friday for renewed dialogue with Russia, saying the current situation was "absurd".

Laschet, a former candidate for chancellor for Merz's conservative CDU party, said "if Europe wants to be sovereign, it must be able to represent its own positions".

"That is precisely why (French) President (Emmanuel) Macron's approach is correct," said Laschet, who heads the German parliament's foreign affairs committee.

Macron said last month Europe should find a "framework" for engaging with the Kremlin in the "coming weeks".

Laschet pointed out that at the moment "European heads of government work out joint positions with (Ukrainian) President (Volodymyr) Zelensky which are then taken to Moscow by American negotiators".

"Europe is incapacitating itself," he said.—AFP

DEMONSTRATORS hold a giant Cuban flag during a protest in front of the US embassy in Havana against the incursion in Venezuela. Thirty-two Cuban soldiers lost their lives during the attack on Jan 3.—AFP

CIA chief travels to Caracas, meets Venezuelan leader

WASHINGTON: US Central Intelligence Agency head John Ratcliffe travelled to Venezuela on Thursday and met leader Delcy Rodriguez, a US administration official said, in the highest-level American visit since the fall of Nicolas Maduro.

President Donald Trump sent the spy chief to Caracas for a meeting that lasted approximately two hours, US sources said, less than two weeks after Maduro and his wife were seized in a military operation.

"At President Trump's direction, (CIA) Director Ratcliffe travelled to Venezuela to meet interim president Delcy Rodriguez to deliver the message that the United States looks forward to an improved working relationship," the Trump administration official said.

The official added that Ratcliffe and Rodriguez "discussed potential opportunities for economic collaboration and that Venezuela can no longer be a safe haven for America's adversaries, especially narco traffickers".

The visit came a day after Trump spoke to Rodriguez for the first time - and on the same day that Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado presented Trump with her Nobel Peace prize at the White House.

Trump has so far backed Rodriguez, Maduro's former vice president and a former vocal ally of the ousted leader, to stay in charge so long as Venezuelan oil keeps flowing.

Ratcliffe sits at Trump's cabinet meetings and is the most senior official to travel to Venezuela since the United States toppled leftist Maduro two weeks ago.

US sources billed the CIA chief's visit as a "trust-building measure" that paved the way for continued communication between Washington and Caracas.

The visit was coordinated between the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon, they added.

'Receiving orders'

Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado alleged on Friday that Venezuela's interim leader was receiving "orders", apparently suggesting they were coming from the United States.

"She is not in an agreement of her own free will" and is rather "following orders", Machado said during an event in Washington.

First post-Maduro flight

The first US deportation flight to Venezuela since the ouster of Nicolas Maduro landed in Caracas on Friday.

The flight from Phoenix, Arizona, which was carrying 231 Venezuelans, landed at Maiquetia international airport, two weeks after Maduro's capture by US forces.

For months after the standoff began with the United States last year, Venezuela continued to take back undocumented migrants until Washington suspended them last month on the eve of the attacks.

The resumption of the returns is seen as yet another sign of a post-Maduro thaw in relations between Washington and Caracas.

Trump has boasted that Washington now effectively runs the Caribbean country, in conjunction with Maduro's former deputy Delcy Rodriguez, now acting president.—AFP

Tymoshenko released on bail in graft probe

KYIV: A court in Kyiv released former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko on bail on Friday pending a trial to determine whether she paid members of Ukraine's parliament to sway their voting.

The 65-year-old stalwart of Ukrainian politics, who has denied the charges and said the case is politically motivated, served as prime minister twice after 2005.

After losing the 2010 presidential election to pro-Russian figure Viktor Yanukovych, she was jailed for abuse of office - a case her backers, rights groups and Western governments said was political retribution.

The anti-corruption court on Friday set bail at $762,000, barred Tymoshenko from leaving the capital without permission and ordered her to hand over her passport.

Prosecutors claimed Tymoshenko divulged details of a cash-for-votes scheme to another member of parliament and that payments were $10,000 a month.

Tymoshenko appeared in court in her trademark crown braid and described the allegations as a "provocation".

The court "carried out a political order specifically to discredit me", she said.

In court, Tymoshenko said she was unable to post bail herself because her bank accounts had been frozen. Media reported she was given five days to pay.

Since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine four years ago, political campaigning has been largely on hold as Kyiv banned elections under martial law and the country rallied behind the war effort.

But a string of sweeping corruption scandals has rocked the war-torn country in the past months, forcing ministers as well as President Volodymyr Zelensky's top aide, Andriy Yermak, out of office.

Ukraine has long been plagued by corruption and cracking down on graft is seen as a key requirement of its bid to join the European Union.—AFP

Somali leader visits city claimed by breakaway region

MOGADISHU: Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud visited on Friday a provincial capital claimed by the breakaway region of Somaliland - the first visit by a sitting president there in nearly 50 years.

The visit to Las Anod, administrative capital of the Sool region, comes amid heightened diplomatic tensions in the Horn of Africa after Israel recognised Somaliland, drawing strong opposition from Mogadishu.

Mohamud was attending the inauguration of the new and first president of Northeast State, a region that declared itself Somalia's sixth federal state in August.

Somalia is a federation of semi-autonomous states, some of which have fraught relations with the central government in Mogadishu.

The Northeast State comprises the regions of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn, all territories Somaliland claims as integral to its borders.—AFP

As Trump turns screws, how long can Europe play nice?

BRUSSELS: One headspinning year down, three more to go.

Buffeted by a US superpower turned hostile under Donald Trump, Europe is struggling to set red lines as its once-close ally attacks its laws, eggs on the far-right and threatens its sovereignty in Greenland.

Any lingering doubts over the shifting winds in Washington were laid to rest with the release of last month's US security strategy taking most virulent aim not at China or Russia, but at the European Union.

Europe had barely absorbed that shock when it was blindsided by the US president's vow to wrest mineral-rich Greenland from EU and Nato member Denmark, by force if need be.

European nations scrambled a military mission to Greenland to try to defuse Trump's threat, but pushing back at the US president is easier said than done.

"Telling Trump 'You can't do that', is not language that he understands," summed up one EU diplomat.

"We must appease Trump, not poke the beast."

The bottom line is that Europe's hands are tied: the continent is surging defence spending to break its security reliance on the United States, but for now it still needs US help to end the Ukraine war, and deter the looming Russian threat to its east.

In that spirit leaders have stopped well short of calling out Trump's threats - levied right as the Europeans held crunch talks with US envoys on locking in post-war security guarantees for Ukraine.

Instead they have reached for their now-familiar Trump playbook: avoid escalation at all costs, and work to mollify the US president - until the next time.

The half-dozen Europeans with a direct line to Trump, from France's Emmanuel Macron and Italy's Giorgia Meloni to Nato chief Mark Rutte, can claim some successes with this strategy, namely in clawing back a seat at the table of talks to end the Ukraine war.

'Most challenging part'

But as Denmark's leader Mette Frederiksen warned this week, with three quarters of Trump's presidency left to run, there is reason to expect "the most challenging part" is yet to come.

And Europe may not be able to play nice forever.

Trump's threats to Greenland are just one part of the picture.

Last year's trade standoff with Washington saw Europe strong-armed into what was widely seen as a lopsided deal.

Since then Team Trump has pressed an all-out assault branding Europe's civilisation moribund, imposing sanctions over digital rules it calls censorship, and vowing to boost political forces aligned with the president's MAGA ideology.

Strongman Viktor Orban can expect the weight of US foreign policy behind him in Hungary's April elections, with Elon Musk's *X* acting as a force multiplier for hard-right narratives.

And France's 2027 election looms as a key test.

Trump's camp has "formulated quite clearly" it would welcome a far-right win in the nuclear-armed EU heavyweight, said Tara Varma, European policy expert at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The spectre of MAGA-fuelled interference feeds into the critical issue of whether the EU has the mettle to keep US tech giants in check.

So far the EU has stared down threats of US retaliation to keep enforcing its laws against online abuses and disinformation, with fines on *X* and others.

But even penalties in the hundreds of millions are seen as small fry for the likes of Musk, who pours expletive-laden scorn on the EU and its rules.

So what more can Europe do to try to turn the tables? Simple, say advocates of tougher action: play the economic card, as America's biggest bilateral trade partner.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

SEOUL: Firefighters battle a blaze in a shantytown near the South Korean capital. The fire forced the evacuation of over 250 people from the impoverished area near the famous Gangnam district.—AFP

NABEUL: Women collect "Maltese oranges", a variety specific to Tunisia, at a farm in Bou Argoub, in the country's northeast.—AFP

PHALABORWA: Onlookers inspect damage to a bridge crossing the Ga-Selati River, following heavy rains over much of South Africa's Limpopo province. Heavy rains have drenched the northeast of the country since late last year, claiming 30 lives.—AFP

ITALY's Prime Minister Georgia Meloni (left) and her Japanese counterpart Sanae Takaichi shake hands during their meeting in Tokyo—AFP

Italian PM urges Nato to coordinate in Arctic

ROME: Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni urged Nato on Friday to develop "a coordinated presence" in the Arctic region to prevent tensions and respond to "interference by other actors", amid escalating tensions among Western allies over Greenland.

In a letter read during the presentation of an Italian government paper on the Arctic, Meloni said the region was becoming increasingly important due to the development of new sea routes and its huge "energy and mineral resources".

Italy has had observer status on the Arctic Council that oversees the region since 2013 and updated its policy amid recent US-Danish tensions over Greenland, which sharpened focus on the area.

President Donald Trump has renewed calls for American control of Greenland to prevent Russia or China from occupying it. The island, an autonomous territory of Denmark, rejected the idea in talks held in Washington this week, exposing "fundamental" differences.

Focus on Russia and China

"We are an observer country in the Arctic Council and have always upheld respect for international law, beginning with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea," Meloni said.

The Italian policy document pointed to Russia's renewed focus on the Arctic, which included a build-up of its military presence there.

"This more assertive posture ... combined with the clear demonstration of the violation of the principle of the inviolability of borders shown in Ukraine, first led Nato and subsequently the European Union to react," the document said.

Italy's document also flagged China's attempt to raise its Arctic profile as a self-declared "near-Arctic state", including growing interest in shipping along the Northern Sea route and closer ties with Moscow that extend to military matters.—Reuters

DUBAI: A helicopter of the United Arab Emirates army flies past a newly hotel.—AFP

BERLIN: A giant billboard displays an advertisement for the German armed forces (Bundeswehr). The slogan 'Frei. Will. Ich' (literally: I want to be free) plays on 'Freiwillig', a German word meaning 'voluntarily'. Mandatory military service has not yet been reintroduced in Germany.—AFP